A NOT-SO SECULAR HUMANISM

September 10, 1989, 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 14:1, 7-14
Genesis 1:24-27

"...you have made them little less than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." -Psalm 8:5 (Inclusive Lectionary Language)

There's something about a sky full of stars that make a theologian or a poet out of everyone. There is something about lying on your back looking up into a night sky that feels like worship. It has been a summer vacation ritual for us for many years... on the seashore, after the sun goes down, to sit down on the deck by the ocean, and look at the stars, and often times, to lie back for an extended period of gazing and wondering. No one says much. It's almost as if you know you're in the presence of the holy. We've enjoyed meteor showers and satellites over the years and it's hardly original, of course, but I never do it without hearing the words of the eighth Psalm...

"O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!
When I look at thy heavens,...
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;..."

You can, after all, live for a long time in a city without seeing them. You can even forget they're there.

Annie Dillard loves Pittsburgh, but she writes:

"I remember what the city has to offer; human companionship, major-league baseball, and a clatter of quickening stimulus." What is lost, says Dillard, is innocence and a sense of one's self. And so she retreats regularly to a wilderness cabin, not simply to get in touch with nature or God - reality beyond herself; but precisely because being there puts her in touch with herself.

The Psalm is only partly a doxology of praise and adoration to God. It is also a celebration of the human.

"When I look at moon and stars...
what is man - who are these
human beings - that thou
art mindful of them?"

It's always like that. You think about God as much as you are able, which ultimately is not much, and then you find yourself thinking about yourself... One of my star-watching memories involves one of my children, about ten years old, looking at the stars with me - and, without either prompting or even suggesting, asking: "Dad, where do we go when we die?" Something about the stars brings out the most urgent human questions. Something about the heavens forces the issue of earth to the front. Something about God always raises the issue of humankind... "Who are we? What are we here for? Where are we going?"

On July the 20th we remembered the lunar landing twenty years ago. One writer recalled - "Over the TV crackled the words - 'Tranquility Base - the Eagle has landed,'" and one could be inspired to ask with the Psalmist, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" The stars and moon have been raising the issue for centuries.

Theology is ultimately tongue-tied. Theology is a activity of the human mind and is as limited as our humanity is. Theologians know better than anyone that the subject of their discipline is ultimately inaccessible so the tools of the trade are metaphors, comparisons: "God is like this or that," or stories. And finally what we have to deal with is our own humanity."

Theologians, perhaps because the object of their discipline is ultimately inaccessible, are always making up new words. One of the more influential teaching and writing theologians currently is Douglas John Hall. He has a new name for what we are discussing - Theoanthropology. The issue, says Hall, is not so much the nature of God as it is the nature of human being; the "genius and calling of this human being - intended and willed and created and loved by God."

"Who are we?" After "what's for dinner?" it's the oldest question in human history, someone quipped.

It can be and has been argued that "Who are we?" is really the question the Bible sets out to answer. There is, after all, not much descriptive material about God in the Bible. There is no abstract philosophy. What there are plenty of are stories about people - in relationship with God and with one another.

The first story is about a man and a woman in a garden. In that story God the creator makes the world and the plants and animals and fish, and at the end of the process - human beings: Adam - man, Eve - woman, in God's image. In the story that follows, God kneels down and picks up a handful of mud and fashions the human being and then unlike any other creature, blows breath into it to get it going, give it life.

Two things the Bible says about human beings then. They/we are part of creation, part of the marvelous and ongoing process of creation: limited by the boundaries of creation: made of dust to the dust we return: made out of the good brown mud of the earth. We are children of earth, part of creation. But, they /we are also very different from the rest of creation. We bear God's image. There is something of the divine mirrored in us. We have God's own breath in us. We have been given dominion over

creation. Adam and Eve name the animals, make decisions and mistakes: they are different, they work and have babies; and they alone, in creation, lie awake at night and wonder - "Who are we?"

If we use the Bible as our reference point we will keep both of these ideas in mind. The Biblical answer to the oldest question in history is a kind God of humanism - God inspired. We are the point of the project. The Bible is a story about human beings... but it is not starry-eyed about us.

The Bible is neither too optimistic, nor too pessimistic about human nature. It tries to be both.

Robert Fulghum puts it in these terms:

"Always trust your fellow man.
And always cut the cards...
Always love thy neighbor.
And always pick a good neighborhood to live in."
[All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten, p. 76,77]

The marvelous stories Jesus told demonstrated this same mixture of optimism and pessimism about humankind. The characters in his stories are wonderfully human: they live in this world thoroughly. They worry about things like who gets to sit where at the dinner party. They can be generous to a fault - like the man who stopped by the side of a road to care for a man who had been beaten and robbed. And they can be unfeeling, untouched, ungenerous - like the priest and the bureaucrat who crossed to the other side of the road in order not to have to see the poor man lying there. The people Jesus picked to be disciples are anything but perfect. They are human. They can be heroic, compassionate, insightful; and the next minute they are cowardly, surly and dull.

Christian faith is, I propose, a realistic humanism. It says that human beings are the point of the whole enterprise. But it also says those human beings are truly human, only in relation to the God who created them. Thus - "a not-so secular humanism."

Now, the preacher thinks a long time before using the term "humanism" from the pulpit. The reason is that humanism, or secular humanism, has become the whipping boy for many of the developments in our culture that make many people uncomfortable.

The Moral Majority seized the term, secular humanism, to deplore those aspects of modern life it doesn't like. And in the midst of the verbal battle several years ago, Martin Marty wrote an article in the University of Chicago Magazine that observed that in every age, reactionary religion has to have an infidel to keep at bay; a visible enemy to blame for everything with which it disagrees. Thus the Moral Majority hit list: sex-education, abortion, gun control, arms negotiation, equal rights... were attributed to a secular humanist conspiracy. Tim LaHaye, a spokesman for the movement even announced that the country was being controlled by 375,000 secular humanists.

Humanism, by the way, describes any philosophy or ideology which honors human dignity, emphasizes human reason and celebrates human potential. Nothing there which people of the Bible ought to find offensive or inconsistent with Genesis 1 and Psalm 8.

All humanists are not atheists. Humanism, by nature, is not necessarily secular. The trouble began when a group of people got together and said that one of the opponents of humanist values was religion. And so they issued a Humanist Manifesto in 1933, and again in 1973 which said: "No deity will save us: we must save ourselves." That is a secular statement. In fact, given the human race's penchant for self-destruction, it's a pretty silly statement. But it's probably no more silly than Tim LaHaye's 375,000 secular humanists. In fact, if by "save ourselves" we mean preserve life on this planet, it would appear to be a true - and important statement. The God of the Bible does not seem to be in the business of miraculous interventions. Rather God gives human beings the resources to find their own way. If life ends on this planet, that is to say, it won't be God's fault, it will be ours. The humanists also said: "We believe that traditional, dogmatic, or authoritarian religion that places revelation of God, ritual or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species." I do not disagree with that. Jesus said the same thing. So did the prophets before him. "I despise your religious feasts and rituals," wrote Amos, on God's behalf. "The stench of your burnt offerings is an offense... Let justice roll down like waters."

The problem of humanism from a Christian perspective is that it is inclined to give us more credit than we deserve: to make more of us than would seem appropriate: and to be unrealistic about the shadow side, the dark side of our human nature.

Secular humanism cannot deal with the reality of the Holocaust, for instance: the tragedy of the most rational, cultural and artistic society in the world, captivated by the absolute evil of Nazism and its policy of genocide.

There is a great line in <u>Hamlet</u> -

"What a piece of work is man
How noble in reason
How infinite in faculty
In form and moving how express and admirable
In action how like an angel
In apprehension how like a god."

That's lovely. It's pure humanism. And it's only half the truth. There's a devastating scene in the rock musical, "Hair." Various racial and national groups appear on the stage and systematically kill off the group before them: Anglo-Saxons, Native Americans, Orientals, Afro-Americans. Science fiction characters with laser guns finish out the ghastly scene and then come the lines:

"What a piece of work is man
How noble is reason
How infinite in faculty."

That is part of the picture too. The distressing dispute at Auschwitz between the Polish Roman Catholic hierarchy and Jewish groups dramatically illustrates the perpetual dilemma. At Auschwitz humankind was at its worst, as the S.S. systematically killed millions of Jews and Polish patriots. But there was a human greatness there as people rose above the demonic realities of genocide and exhibited goodness, gentleness, selflessness, bravery and beauty - humankind at its best.

"Who are we?"

It is the oldest question in history. And it may be the most important one. It is not simply an academic exercise.

The faith proclaims that you are a child of God... created in God's image, with dominion over creation... But there's a lot about life in the world that would seem to deny that. In fact, a lot of life seems to be a conspiracy against the human.

Where is human nobility and dignity and worth... in the life of a thirty-year-old mother of five children, struggling to make ends meet, caught in the trap of the poor, on welfare, living in a tenth story apartment in Cabrini-Green with its dark, foul smelling corridors, and violent drug traffic, and elevators that won't work? Does she leave her five children in order to work and possibly endanger her public aid status with its health care, or shall she try to keep her sanity there - twenty-four hours a day?

Where is the human dimension in the cardiac care unit on the perplexing medical-ethical dilemmas when life can be artificially prolonged almost indefinitely by pumps and tubes?

Where is the human in a world where national policy is based on our ability to incinerate the entire population of our foes more effectively than they can incinerate us?

Where is the human in an economy which, according to a provocative article in Time last week, discards workers like pieces of Kleenex? "Where has the Gung-Ho Gone?" it asked, the upbeat traditional enthusiasm of the American worker; and answered that we work in a climate of threat, not security, that company loyalty no longer matters, that in the equation of modern American industry, people are the expendable factor. Middle managers, over 50, keep their heads down low, don't make waves and keep a sharp eye out over their shoulder because in growing numbers they are simply - out of a job.

Or where is the human when a woman's entire sense of self is as a sex object, or a meal producer: or a man - an income provider and short term insurance policy?

It would seem that we need more, not less humanism.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a contrary voice to most of the voices we hear. It is a human voice. It says to you, whoever you are, regardless

of whatever you are called, that you are God's child. You are of infinite value to the one who created you. You are the whole point of the enterprise.

"To be human is to glimpse the significance of our insignificance," Bible scholar James Luther Mays says. That can happen when we look up into a sky full of stars, or when we watch the lunar landing or the glorious pictures of Neptune and ponder that tiny speck of human technology now headed for the edge of the universe, whatever that means. And sometimes it happens while listening to great music or seeing great art or witnessing the birth of a baby or simply watching as a child discovers the surprising mystery of her own hand. And sometimes it happens when you are near someone who dies, or when you know you are loved - and from deep inside yourself you hear a voice: "O Lord, how majestic is thy name... Who am I that you should care for me?"

The intensely human makes us think about God. Religion stimulates us to ponder the mystery not only of God but of us, the mystery of our own being.

The glory of every human being is in the fact that God loves us, has given us dominion and responsibility and potentiality. Christian faith is humanistic precisely because of the honor God has bestowed in us in Jesus Christ.

That is the ground of my faith and yours. God knows us: cares about us: loves us: here, in the midst of this life. It is also the vocation to which we are called: to live as responsible people, loving and honoring and serving others as we have been loved and honored and served.

A professor of mine once put it in a way I have never forgotten:

"There is something about human nature that is defined by the fact that it has been visited by the divine."

And long before him that ancient poet surely stretched out on the ground, on a warm summer night, looking up into a starry night sky and asking: "Who are we? What am I?...that thou are mindful."

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!"

Amen.